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# Living Happy and Healthy in Old Age: The Development of Recreational Programming for Older Adults

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# Living Happy and Healthy in Old Age: The Development of Recreational Programming for Older Adults

## **Abstract**

Adventures Without Limits (AWL), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization emphasizing the spiritual dimensions of contact with the natural world, focuses on fostering conscious efforts to heal, enrich, and expand the human spirit (Adventures Without Limits, 2014). Data collected from informal interviews, observation, and survey responses regarding implementation of newly created older adult specific programming indicated an increase in overall mood, establishment of new friendships between participants within the community, increased desire to participate in nature-based physical activities, and increased feelings of empowerment in older adult participants, indicating a need for additional recreation-based services targeted towards this growing population.

## **Degree Type**

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## **Degree Name**

Doctorate of Occupational Therapy (OTD)

## **Subject Categories**

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Living Happy and Healthy in Old Age:

The Development of Recreational Programming for Older Adults

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### Living Happy and Healthy in Old Age:

#### The Development of Recreational Programming for Older Adults

Abstract: Adventures Without Limits (AWL), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization emphasizing the spiritual dimensions of contact with the natural world, focuses on fostering conscious efforts to heal, enrich, and expand the human spirit (Adventures Without Limits, 2014). Data collected from informal interviews, observation, and survey responses regarding implementation of newly created older adult specific programming indicated an increase in overall mood, establishment of new friendships between participants within the community, increased desire to participate in nature-based physical activities, and increased feelings of empowerment in older adult participants, indicating a need for additional recreation-based services targeted towards this growing population.

In 2014, a contract was created between a local 501c3 non-profit organization, Adventures Without Limits (AWL), and two Pacific University doctoral level occupational therapy students. Through this contact, assistance was provided in the development and expansion of older adult specific programming in the Portland metropolitan area, with a primary goal of increased health and well being in aging populations. The details of this project are described below.

### The Organization

Adventures Without Limits (AWL), a 501(c)3 non-profit organization founded in 1995, emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of contact with the natural world and focuses on fostering conscious efforts to heal, enrich, and expand the human spirit (Adventures Without Limits, 2014). This organization is one of the few recreation-based programs in the country with a philosophy of full inclusion. Throughout the years, AWL has focused on working with people unable to participate in traditional outdoor recreation. Each year, AWL provides about 130-170 single and multiple day trips and serves between 2,000-3,000 participants through outdoor adventure programs (Adventures Without Limits, 2014). This equal opportunity recreation provider offers adventure-based programming including: sea kayaking, cross-country skiing, rafting, snowshoeing, snow camping, canoeing, caving, backpacking, team building/ropes courses, indoor/outdoor rock climbing, and recumbent biking to people of all ability levels, ages, and backgrounds. AWL seeks to inspire healthy living through the use of an alternative forum for education and the teaching of new skills, with an emphasis on client safety, personal growth, and empowerment. This organization recognizes that regular access to natural settings can have major impacts on the health and well being of all populations, and that this access has been shown to greatly reduce symptoms of depression, anxiety, and other health concerns related

specifically to aging individuals (Romo, 2013; Townsend, 2010; Kaplan, 2001; Talbot 1991).

AWL is mission-directed to empower individuals of all abilities through quality outdoor experiences, with a specific mission statement that states the following, “We put people first and inspire individuals through safe and fun outdoor adventures. We encourage all participants to explore and develop an awareness of the natural environment and themselves” (Adventures Without Limits, 2014). Through the following listed AWL values: safety; people first; awareness; diversity; uniqueness; fun; inspiration; and community, AWL seeks to follow their organizational vision of providing a community where all people have the opportunity to experience outdoor adventures as a means with which to boost overall health and well being.

Deeper experiences with wilderness are used in the emotional and psychological treatment of clients suffering from a number of conditions, including: psychosis, depression, substance abuse, and physical injury. For example, the combination of physical activity and social connection in the context of the natural environment has been found to be effective in preventing the onset and the escalation of depression, a disorder common in elderly populations (Mukherjee, 2013). AWL as an organization firmly believes that, “when small groups of people adventure together in natural environments, the health and well-being of humans, communities, and the natural environment are enhanced (Adventures Without Limits, 2014)”.

AWL serves ages 9 and up and provides trips for a wide variety of populations including those with disabilities, at risk and homeless youth, specialized non-profit programs, businesses, adults, and families. They provide participants an opportunity to get outdoors and participate in activities that will allow them to gain new skills, increase self-confidence, overcome fears, and have fun. Traditionally, AWL has focused its services towards populations living with physical and intellectual disabilities as well as at-risk youth populations. However, recognizing a need for

older adult specific programming, AWL had, previous to Pacific University student involvement, established partnerships with a 2 local senior centers in the surrounding area. However, previous attempts to expand older adult programming had been unsuccessful prior to outside involvement in the establishment of programming and community outreach, specifically geared towards older populations. Despite AWL's efforts, older adult participation remained quite low due to incomplete older adult specific programming at the organization.

### The Project

To begin this project, an in depth needs assessment of AWL's current programming was conducted, and reviewed with staff members at the organization. Based upon the information presented, the Pacific University students and AWL representatives arrived at the following conclusions:

- The development of older adult programming at AWL, based upon the organization's current mission statement and vision, would support a beneficial and meaningful way for older adults to enjoy their lives, and provide the possibilities, promise, and value of aging in their community so that older adults could:
  - Develop increased independence in daily living, and boost overall health and well-being
  - Participate in an active lifestyle choice that supports the inherent values of older adults
  - Be involved in the community, and build on strengths, while maximizing potential
- Organizational programming appeared to support AWL's mission statement. However, closer examination of AWL's current programming showed a significant gap in services

offered to older adults, as well as older adult participation in services offered. Indications were that the need for services to assist older adults would continue to dramatically increase over the next several decades, and that the demands of this population would require different sets of services, options, and choices. It was determined that the development of senior specific programming would further support AWL's mission statement, with recognition of an increasing demand to meet needs of this diverse population, and the importance of providing services to expanding older adult communities in the area.

- Growing populations of older adults in the Portland metropolitan area indicated a need for increased services designed to improve the health and well being of this population as a means for health maintenance and health improvement.
- There was an in-house need for an increase in staff knowledge as to how to adapt current programming to meet the needs of older adult participants.
- A lack of outdoor nature-based recreational senior services in the Portland metropolitan area indicated an increased need for older adult services in the surrounding community, signifying an opportunity for AWL to increase participation, and as such increase yearly funding and participant numbers.
- Development of senior programming would assist AWL in balancing their budget, meeting fiscal year financial goals, and assist in the accrual of additional, and needed, adaptive equipment through partnerships with surrounding senior centers.
- Increased community outreach would allow for the accrual of additional funds necessary for obtaining adaptive equipment specific to older adult needs.



- Outreach and Partnership with surrounding assisted living centers would be the primary means with which contact and contract with the desired population would be made, and maintained, helping to increase AWL's clientele base.

From the above listed conclusions the following priorities and long term objectives were decided upon for the development of older adult programming:

#### Priorities

- Meet the needs of growing older populations in and around the Portland Metropolitan area
- Close the gap between current older adult programming and the high need for increased older adult programming in the area
- Optimize the physical and mental well being of older adults and adults with disabilities

#### Long-term objectives

- To boost the health and wellness of older adults in the Portland Metropolitan area through the use of outdoor recreational activities
- To create sustainable partnerships with senior centers in the Portland Metropolitan area and fill senior specific programming needs within the community
- To offer a variety of outdoor recreational activities designed to meet the diverse interests, and specific needs of older adults in the Portland Metropolitan area
- To create partnerships between youth and older adults in the community through the establishment and implementation of intergenerational programming
- To foster life-long learning in older adult populations in the Portland metropolitan area

### The Process

Based upon the information determined through the needs assessment process, development and expansion of older adult specific programming at AWL began with the development of an 84-page staff-training manual. This manual highlights many areas specific to planning physical activity around the needs of older adults, including: how to engage, encourage, anticipate needs, make activities meaningful, confront fears and anxiety, adapt activities for specific health conditions and age-related diagnoses, and an extended list of outdoor recreation sites appropriate for use on older adult trips. The manual was then uploaded to the organizations shared N drive for easy access to all existing employees, and added to employee orientation for new additions to the staff.

In addition to the development of a staff training manual, it was also determined that current pre and post trip surveys would need to be replaced with up-to-date information and revised questions/layout, as these surveys would later provide a large portion of the information used to adjust services geared towards older adults at AWL. A new pre-trip ability/health level survey was constructed and put into circulation in order to provide staff with information on necessary equipment adaptations, mobility concerns, and/or health restrictions prior to trip activities to ensure each participant a meaningful and fun experience. A newly revised post-trip survey was also created and put into circulation to better assess the quality of experience of each participant, and any additional needs or wants that were not addressed.

Marketing materials in the form of new client folders, informational flyers, and client handouts were then created to boost organizational appearance and supplement new client meetings, and the establishment of new contracts with senior centers in the Portland, OR metropolitan area. A list of potential facilities, contact names, and specific site information were

created, calls made, and meetings scheduled. Outreach to older adult populations included: on site meetings with potential senior center management and center participants, as well as table events at various functions in the surrounding area. Several partnerships were created through these efforts, and trips scheduled and added to AWL's already extensive calendar of events planned for the summer period of 2015.

Following the establishment of new community contracts, various activities, including: adaptive biking, white water rafting, and kayaking, were led by the Pacific University students and AWL staff/volunteers. Adaptive techniques described in the older adult staff manual were implemented, expanded, and adjusted to fit the needs of participants on each trip, and improve accessibility to recreation based activities as a means to boost the overall health and well being of AWL's clientele.

### The Outcome

Subsequent to each AWL lead trip, informal interviewing sessions were held with select participants, during which these key informants brought up the importance of testimonials and word of mouth as a means for increased outreach when looking to expand services beyond traditionally served populations, such as older adult communities. In addition to this, these informants supported a need for increased older adult services, citing a lack of fully inclusive organizations in the Portland, OR metropolitan area.

Post-trip responses to survey questions indicated increased feelings of empowerment and excitement surrounding participation in activities otherwise believed to be out of reach of older adult populations. Adaptive devices used to enhance participant experience were also cited as a major means with which older adults were able to work around barriers to physical participation

due to various health conditions, and again were cited as boosting morale and increasing interest in recreation based physical activity.

### Conclusion

Data collected from informal interviews, observation, and survey responses indicated an increase in overall mood, establishment of new friendships between participants within the community, increased desire to participate in nature-based physical activities, and increased feelings of empowerment. Natural surroundings coupled with an organization equipped to provide fully inclusive services for aging populations such as Adventures Without Limits, provide an arena for individuals to leave behind daily struggles with declines in both mental and physical functioning often accompanying the aging process, increase socialization with peers, and elevate overall health and well being, thus positively affecting day to day function. For a population that has been led to believe that “they can’t”, AWL provides an opportunity for a shift in thought to “I can”.

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